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ABSTRACT

The study, conducted by Temple University's Institute for Survey Research during September - December of 1976, consisted of interviews of more than 2,200 children aged 7 to 11, and more than 1,700 of their parents. The interviews, of a scientifically selected sample, were structured to determine the general environment in which children live--their family lives, their friends, schools, health and neighborhood activities--and to learn their perceptions, feelings, attitudes and values. In an interview lasting more than one-half hour, the youngsters were asked to report their feelings about different areas of their lives in a variety of ways. They were asked to pick one of five sentences to tell how they feel about various work and play activities. They were asked how often they feel bored, lonely, worry about things, get scared, and feel angry, and whether specific situations made them feel worried, ashamed, afraid, and angry. They were given a set of five faces ranging from very happy to very sad and asked "Which face shows how you feel about: yourself? your school work? your family?..." The study describes some of the perceptions, attitudes, and feelings they reported. (Author)

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Summary of Preliminary Results

NATIONAL SURVEY OF CHILDREN

The National Survey of Children was designed and sponsored by the Foundation for Child Development to give American children a chance to speak for themselves, to determine the effects that social changes in America are having on children, and to help guide programs and policies that affect children's lives.

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In an interview lasting more than one-half hour, the youngsters were asked to report their feelings about different areas of their lives in a variety of ways. For example:

- They were asked to pick one of five sentences -- "I love it!" "I like it." "I'm not sure." "I don't like it." "I hate it!"-- to tell how they feel about various work and play activities.
- They were asked how often they feel bored, lonely, worry about things, get scared, and feel angry, and whether specific situations made them feel worried, ashamed, afraid, and angry.
- They were given a set of five faces ranging from very happy to very sad and asked "Which face shows how you feel about: yourself? your school work? your family?..."

Here are some of the perceptions, attitudes, and feelings they reported:

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How Things are Going In Their Lives

Most of the children interviewed said they felt good about themselves and about their lives. Eight out of ten kids picked a happy face to "show how you feel about yourself" and to "show how things are going in your life." Over 75% expressed agreement with the statement: "I am lucky;" and 90% said: "I like being the way I am."

But substantial minorities of the children reported that they frequently have negative feelings. More than 16% said they "often get angry," about 15% reported that they "worry about things a lot," and about 13% said they "often get scared."

More than 8% of the youngsters said they felt lonely "a lot" and wished they had more friends. The highest concentrations of lonely kids were found not in rural areas of America, as might be expected, but in inner city ghettos. More than 16% of black kids in the survey said they felt lonely "a lot."

About 7% of the kids said they felt "bored, like there is nothing interesting to do" on "most afternoons." Little more than a third of the children felt that "there are interesting things to do most afternoons," but the proportion feeling this way rises steadily with the level of their parents' education, so that nearly half of the children of college-educated parents found interesting things to do on most afternoons. By contrast, the proportion of youngsters who described themselves as bored "most afternoons" shows little significant variation with education, income or type of community.

Perhaps the most disturbing finding in the survey as an indicator of the state of American civilization is the large number of children who expressed fears related to violence and crime.

About Fear and Violence in Their Lives

More than two-thirds of the youngsters in the survey said they feel afraid "that somebody bad might get into your house." And a quarter of the children answered "yes" to the question: "When you go outside, are you afraid someone might hurt you?"

Are these just childhood fears of bogeymen and monsters which might be normally expected, or are they tangible concerns based on what children have learned from their parents, from television, and from their own experiences? Which children say they are afraid of being hurt when they go outside? Not just the younger kids. There is no significant age difference between those children who say they are afraid to go outside and those who say they are not. Girls are somewhat more likely than boys to be anxious about what might happen when they go outside - or at least more willing to admit their fear. Nearly a third of the girls in the survey said they felt such fear as opposed to about 20% of the boys. The fear of going outside is also more common among youngsters from families with incomes below $5,000 and among those from Hispanic-American backgrounds.

"Who is the person you are most afraid of?"

When the children were asked this question, they were much more likely to name a real person than an imaginary figure. Around 30% of the kids named someone specific who had threatened or hurt them in the past - an older child or adult in the neighborhood, or a kid at school - or mentioned a general class of threatening people, such as

"strangers," "burglars," or "kids who bother me while I'm playing." In addition, approximately 15% of the children named a member of their own family as the person they were most afraid of. "My father" led the list of feared family members, being named by nearly one child in ten.

There were, of course, children who mentioned imaginary figures or fictional characters in response to this question. About 15% of the kids gave answers such as "the devil"..."Dracula"..."Frankenstein" ..."Big Foot." And about a third of the kids said there was "no one" they were most afraid of. But the fears certainly cannot all be dismissed as imaginary.

Other evidence from the survey suggests that many of the children have reason to be fearful. Some 20% of American school children live in neighborhoods where, according to their parents, there are "undesirable people in the streets, parks or playgrounds, such as drunks, drug addicts, or tough older kids." And more than 15% live in areas where parents say "neighborhood crime" is a problem.

But the type of neighborhood or community the child lives in is not as important as a predictor of fear as is the child's own past experience. The majority of the kids who say they are afraid to go outside also report that they <u>have</u> been bothered when they've played outside. And the number of children who report such negative experiences far exceeds the number who say they're afraid.

<u>Victimization Experiences.</u>

More than 40% of the children in the survey said they've been bothered by older kids while playing outside and more than one out of eight by grown-ups. About a third of the children report that they've been threatened with a beating, and about 13% that they've actually

been beaten up. About 12% reported having been hit with something "like a stick or a bottle;" 25% that they've had something taken from them, "like a ball or a toy;" and 5% that they've had money taken from them.

Not surprisingly, youngsters from rural areas are less likely to report having had such experiences than children from urban areas. But within urban areas there is less variation from center city to suburb as might be anticipated. This is probably due in part to the protective measures that parents (and children themselves) take in bad neighborhoods. More than 15% of black inner-city kids reported that their "mother or some other grown-up has to watch... when you play outside," as opposed to only 5% of children overall who have to be watched.

Television and Fear

What role does television play in stimulating children's fears? The fear that "somebody bad might get into the house" is so widespread, cutting across all residential, economic, and ethnic groups, that the influence of television is certainly suggested. But there is more direct evidence in the survey linking television to children's fears.

Just under a quarter of the children said they feel afraid "of TV programs where people fight and shoot guns." And children who are reported to be heavy TV-watchers - whose parents say they watch 4 or more hours of television on the average weekday - were twice as likely as other children to report that they "get scared often."

About Their Families

More than 9 out of 10 children picked a happy face to show how they feel about their families. The vast majority of kids believe their parents are proud of them and nearly two-thirds think their parents treat them "more like a grown-up" than "like a baby."

At the same time, more than 8 out of 10 children said they worry about their families. (In families where the mother describes the marriage as "not too happy," the proportion of kids who say they worry about the family rises to virtually one hundred percent.) More than half of those kids living with two parents said they feel afraid when their parents have arguments, and nearly half feel angry "when no one pays attention to you at home."

Of those kids who have someone "who acts as your father," nearly half wish their fathers would spend more time with them. More than a third of the kids wish their mothers would spend more time with them.

More than one quarter of the children in the survey -- more than half of black children -- are not living with their biological fathers. Less than one third of the children whose parents are separated or divorced see their fathers on a regular basis.

Ongoing parental discord or separation seems more closely associated with aggressive child behavior than the absence of a parent per se. Children in marriages described by their parents as "not too happy" are three times as likely to have gotten into a fight at school in the previous week as those from happy marriages. Children with parents currently separated are also more likely to have had a fight at school. Children of a widowed parent or a mother who had never

married were less likely -- about the same frequency as children with happily married parents.

On the other hand, children of never married mothers were more likely to report being lonely and wishing their mothers would spend more time with them.

About Their Home Environments

What rules do American children have at home? Only about 3 children in 100 said they are allowed to "use curse words or swear words" and about 6 in 100 (about 16% of black kids) to stay up as late as they want.

But more than half of the children reported that they are allowed to watch television whenever they want and more than a third to watch whatever kinds of programs they want. More than a quarter of the kids said they are allowed to have snacks and eat whatever they want. Children of divorced and never married mothers were more likely to be allowed to do these things than children whose parents were happily married.

Although more than 95 percent of the parents in the survey said discipline is "very important" in raising children, about 17 percent of the children reported that their parents made them follow rules "just some of the time" or "hardly ever."

How are American kids rewarded when they are good?

- Nearly three quarters say they get verbal praise.
- More than two-thirds say they get kissed or hugged.
- Nearly two-thirds say their mothers buy them something special, like a toy or ice cream.

- More than half say they get something special to eat.
- More than four out of ten get money or extra allowance.

How are American kids punished when they've been bad?

- Eight out of ten say they get yelled at.
- Nearly two-thirds say they get spanked.
- Six out of ten say they are sent to their rooms or made to stay alone.
- More than half say they are not allowed to play with friends; about 45% are not allowed to watch TV.
- About six kids out of a hundred say their mothers make fun of them and three out of a hundred say their mothers tell them "she doesn't love you."

About Their Neighborhoods

"How is this neighborhood as a place for kids to grow up in? Do you think it is: very good, pretty good, or not so good?"

Children are more critical of the neighborhoods in which they live than are their parents. Less than a third of the children described their neighborhoods as a "very good" place to grow up in, whereas nearly 60% of the parents rated their neighborhoods as "very good" or "excellent" as a place to raise children.

As might be expected, youngsters living in low-income areas of big cities are most unhappy with their neighborhoods and children living in affluent suburbs are least dissatisfied.

Rural areas also come out relatively favorably in the children's ratings. But in no type of American community -- city, suburb, town, or country -- did a majority of the children surveyed describe their neighborhood as a "very good" place to grow up in. Even in affluent suburbs the proportion saying "very good" was only about 40%.

When the children were asked what they would change about their neighborhood "to make it nicer for kids," the two leading changes mentioned were to have more and better places to play and less bad behavior and crime on the part of children and adults in the neighborhood. About one child in six mentioned fighting, crime, vandalism, or meanness as a neighborhood problem they would like to eliminate. Here are some of their words: "People steal"... "People always mean"... "Stop older kids from fighting and picking on little kids"... "Stop kids from breaking bottles and writing on stuff"... "Stop nasty language"... "Get rid of bad kids."

About as many of the youngsters -- around 17% -- mentioned the need for a park or playground close by, or for some other changes to produce more play area for children. More than 7% of the kids wanted to have more children in the neighborhood to play with, although few were as extreme as the child who said he would like to have "all my friends next door."

Other changes the children wanted -- each mentioned by about 5% of the kids -- were:

- to clean up the neighborhood and reduce pollution ("Clean up litter and trash"... "Stop pollution"... "Get rid of roaches"... "Get rid of rats");
- to improve traffic safety ("Slow down cars"... "Put stoplight at corner"... "Paint line in street"); and
- to beautify the neighborhood in some way ("Plant trees"... "More grass"... "More flowers.")

About Their Schools

When asked how they feel about going to school, more than three-quarters of the children said, "I love it!" or "I like it." Less than one child in ten said, "I hate it!" Nearly two-thirds said they were interested in their schoolwork "most of the time" and more than 90% said they like their teachers and most of their classmates.

But schoolwork is a source of anxiety, shame, frustration, and unhappiness for many American children. More than two-third. said they worry about tests at school and nearly two-thirds feel ashamed when they make mistakes at school. Just over half the children expressed agreement with the statement: "I sometimes feel I just can't learn." And nearly half feel angry when they have trouble learning something new.

One out of five youngsters said they would rather go to another school and almost as many picked a sad face to show how they feel about their schoolwork.

As described by the children who go to them, many American elementary schools are disorderly and sometimes violent places. Nearly 20% of the youngsters said their teacher makes the kids in the class follow the rules "just some of the time" or "hardly ever." About 7% of the children (more than 70% of them boys) were willing to admit that they "fool around a lot" in class. With 30 children in a classroom, there would be, on the average, 2 such children per class. So it is perhaps not surprising that over half the children said that "the kids in my class" (but not me!) "fool around a lot when they should be listening."

More than one child in ten said they had gotten into a fight at school "last week" (again, more than 70% of the fighters were boys). Just over 2% said that, in that fight, they got "hit or pushed hard enough to really get hurt." And just under 4% said they "hit or pushed the other kids hard enough to hurt them." About 20% of the children said they had "gotten into trouble with the teacher or the principal for fighting with other kids at school" at some point in their school careers.

Although black kids are, if anything, more positive about school in general, nearly one out of three black children said that if they had the choice they would rather go to another school. The leading reason given for wanting to change schools was the fighting and fooling around that goes on in the present school.

About Being a Boy or a Girl

Nine out of ten children picked a happy face to show how they felt about "being a boy" or "being a girl." More girls than boys expressed unhappiness about their gender. On the other hand, when they were asked: "What do you like best about yourself?", around 7% of the females named "being a girl" as the best thing about them, as compared to the 2% of males who named "being a boy."

Although a large majority of girls (84%) and boys (73%) said it would be "all right for a woman to be President," the survey provided ample evidence that some sex role stereotypes are alive and well. Girls, for example, expressed significantly greater liking than boys for such traditional "female" activities as cooking, sewing, and dancing, while boys expressed greater liking for activities such as "making things out of wood or metal," playing team sports, and "boxing, wrestling, or karate." Furthermore, a question for parents on activities which the child has done by himself/herself without anyone's help showed strong sex differences in the traditional directions for skills such as baking a cake or pie versus making a model car, boat, or airplane.

At the same time, there was evidence of change. For example, less than 5% of the girls said they did not want a job when they grew up but only wanted to be a housewife or mother.

About Being a Black Kid

More than 8 out of 10 black children picked a happy face to show "how you feel about being a Black person." However, one out of 10 picked a sad face.

In general, black children responded more positively than other children to questions concerning their perceptions and feelings about themselves. But significantly more black than white children said they felt "ashamed about your body and how it looks" and more were worried about "growing up to be a woman or man."

A larger proportion of black children than white kids also seem to deny (or at least not report) negative feelings and perceptions about themselves. For example, when asked the question: "Do you get scared: often, sometimes, or hardly ever?", about 10% of black children said they "never" got scared, compared to about 2% of white kids.

Large majorities of both black children (94%) and white children (84%) said it would be "all right for a black person to be President" of the United States.

About Being An American

Nearly 9 out of 10 of the children picked a happy face to "show how you feel about being an American." (But only 8 out of 10 black children made a similar positive choice.)

The children's knowledge of some basic facts about the U.S. government did not quite match their high levels of patriotic pride. Less than three-quarters of the kids could correctly identify the current President of the United States (this is allowing for both "Ford" and "Carter" as correct responses during the election year). Fifteen percent of the kids said they didn't know who the President was or gave no answer, and about 9% named a past President (e.g., George Washington).

Just over 40% of the youngsters said "the President has the right to do anything he wants to do." And just under 40% said "No" in response to the question: "If a person thinks the President is doing a bad job, is it all right for the person to tell other people about it?" However, the children's responses to all these questions showed marked improvement with age.

Who Are Their Heroes?

When the children were asked "Can you tell me the name of a famous person you want to be like?", they tended to respond with a person or character they had seen on TV. Popular entertainers lead the list -- 28 percent of the youngsters named people like Cher, Marie Osmond, Elvis Presley. Next came athletes -- 13 percent named people such as O.J. Simpson and Muhammed Ali. Less than seven percent of the children chose a U.S. political figure (predominately George Washington and Abraham Lincoln). Less than 2 percent picked an artist or writer, or a scientist or physician, as their hero and only one percent chose a humanitarian.

More than 20% said there was "no one" famous they wanted to be like.

What Kinds of Kids Are We Raising?

Are They Healthy?

More than eighty percent of the children in the survey were described by their parents as being in "very good" or "excellent" health. However, the health status of American children does not seem to have changed appreciably in the last decade, despite massive government investment in health, and a substantial increase in the availability of health care services.

In the National Health Examination Survey of children, conducted between 1963 and 1965, five percent of 7 - 11 year olds were reported to be in "fair" or "poor" health. This is virtually the same proportion found in the present survey. In 1976, twenty-one percent of the children were reported to have some health problems that bothered the child or worried the parent. In 1963-65, nineteen percent of American children had a similar problem.

More American children are seeing doctors now than in the past, due in part to the advent of government programs aimed at increasing access to care for lower-income children. In 1963-65, some 14% of 7 - 11 year olds had not seen a doctor in the previous 2 years, whereas in the present survey the figure is down to about 7%. Some 17% of the children in the present survey have not seen a dentist in the last 2 years. The comparable figure was more than 25% in 1963-65.

But disparities in care still exist. While about one white child in ten has never seen a dentist in 1976, the comparable figure for blacks is almost one child in four. Whereas 80% of white children with a health problem that bothers or worries have been taken to see a doctor about it, less than two-thirds of black

children with such a problem have received similar medical attention. Low-income and minority children in inner cities are much more likely to receive their medical care in hospitals or emergency rooms than children from more affluent urban families. And hospitals or health clinics were reported to be "not available" in the area for some seven percent of those children living in rural sections of the U.S.

What About Their Mental Health?

More youngsters are seeing psychologists or psychiatrists now than in the past. Based on parent reports in the present study, just under 5 percent of the children -- or more than 800,000 7 - 11 year olds nationwide -- received some sort of professional help during the past year for an "emotional, behavior, mental, or learning problem." Of every thousand American children in this age range, about 26 are reported to have seen a psychologist or psychiatrist within the past year, and about 60 per thousand have received psychological counseling or psychiatric care at some time in their lives. Although no exactly comparable data are available, this appears to represent an increase of at least 60 percent over the rate of visits to psychologists and psychiatrists found among 12-year-old children in a federal health survey conducted in 1966-70.*

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*The National Health Examination Survey of children in 1963-65 did not include any questions about psychological or psychiatric care, so it has been necessary to compare the present findings with the Health Examination Survey of youths conducted during 1966-70. Data on 12-year-olds were used for comparison.

The change in use of psychiatric care is probably due more to the increased availability and acceptability of such care than to any massive increase in the number of disturbed children. In fact, the proportion of children who are described by their parents as "high strung, tense, and nervous" has decreased since the mid-sixties.

This is scarcely cause for reassurance, however, since there are large numbers of children with psychological problems and a substantial proportion of children who seem to need help are not receiving it. In the past year, one child in 14 -- the equivalent of 1.25 million children nationwide -- has had an emotional, behavior, mental, or learning problem serious enough so that the parent felt or was told that the child needed professional help. A third of these children did not receive any counseling or care.

On the positive side of the ledger, more than two-thirds of the children in the survey were described by their parents as "very enthusiastic, interested in a lot of different things, likes to express his or her ideas." Nearly as many are "usually in a happy mood, very cheerful." And more than half were even reported to be "polite, helpful, considerate of others."

Are They Learning?

Only a little over half of the children in the survey were described by their parents as "learning a lot and doing really well" in school. Nearly one child in five was reported to be "not learning enough, could be doing better." The remainder of the children -- about 28% -- were described as "doing about as well as he/she can."

According to their parents, about 17% of American children are now going to a special class or getting special help in school, either for advanced or remedial work. About 14% of the parents said that thier child should be getting special help, or be in a special class, for advanced or remedial work which is not currently provided by the school.

Parents with more education and higher incomes are more likely to be satisfied by their children's progress in school, though at the highest income levels (above $25,000 per year) there is some reversal of this trend. Black parents are twice as likely to be dissatisfied with their children's progress in school as white parents - more than a third of black children are described as "not learning enough" and nearly 28% of black parents think their child should be getting additional help or be in a special class in school. This situation is made even more poignant by the fact that the educational aspirations of black parents for their children are now higher than those of white parents. And these aspirations are being communicated to their children. More than three-quarters of black children, versus two-thirds of white children, said that their mother wants them to be "one of the best students in the class."

On the average, American parents still have significantly higher educational aspirations for boys than girls, but the differences do seem to have diminished in comparison to those found in 1966-70 (when parents were asked parallel questions in the Health Examination Survey of youths). Parents also tend to be more satisfied with the academic progress of female as opposed to male children.

It must be noted that American parents seem to be no more realistic than American children in assessing how well the child is doing in school compared to other students. Nearly 30% of all children are described as "one of the best students in the class" by both parents and children. Only about 5 percent of children are described as "below the middle of the class" - and again the percentage is virtually identical for the parents and the children. But whereas just under 4 percent of the children describe themselves as "near the bottom of the class," less than two percent of parents are willing to admit that this is where their child stands in the class.

Unplanned Children

According to their mothers, less than half of the youngsters in the survey were the result of a planned pregnancy, in the sense that the mother "wanted to become pregnant at that time." Nearly one child in seven -- the equivalent of more than two million of today's school children -- was an unwanted pregnancy. These children were reported to be in significantly poorer health than their planned counterparts, had more learning problems in school and were prone to have more accidents or injuries. This is not to say that the differences are caused by being an unwanted child alone; the social and economic situation of the family also plays a part. Nevertheless, the state of American children as a whole would be better if these mothers had been successful in controlling their fertility.

Are American Mothers Turning Away From Their Children?

Contrary to Ann Landers readers, more than 9 out of 10 of the mothers in the survey said that, if they had it to do over, they would have children again. Furthermore, most of them felt "very strongly" about it. An even higher percentage felt that having children had made their lives better or made them better people.

A smaller, but still substantial, majority of black mothers said they would have children again (more than seven out of ten). Not quite nine out of ten agreed that children had made their lives better or made them better people.

The higher the mother's education and family income, the more positive was she likely to be about having children. Mothers in unhappy marriages, never-married mothers, separated and divorced mothers, were significantly less likely to say that they would do it over again than happily married mothers. Nevertheless, a majority of mothers in all these groups still said they would do it over.

Description of the Survey Sample

The study population is defined as children living in households in the 48 states, excluding Alaska and Hawaii, who are aged 7 - 11, or more specifically, born between September 1, 1964 and December 31, 1969. The sample was designed to yield approximately 500 interviews with black children and 1500 with non-blacks. Within each racial group, several stages of selection were employed to insure that each eligible child had an equal probability of being selected.

Interviews were conducted with the eligible child and the parent who would be most capable of providing information about the child. This was usually the mother. If a selected family had 3 or more eligible children, two were selected at random to be interviewed.

The first stage consisted of the selection of 100 primary sampling units, or PSUs. 40 PSUs were selected from the 18 largest standard metropolitan statistical areas. These consisted of census tracts or enumeration districts. 60 PSUs were selected from outside these SMSAs, and consisted of counties or groups of contiguous counties.

The second stage consisted of the selection of census tracts and enumeration districts within these 60 PSUs. Altogether, 100 PSUs, 700 census tracts and enumeration districts were selected. These first two basic stages are done once and then can be used as the basis for several subsequent studies.

In this study, the third stage consisted of the sub-selection of 86 of the 100 PSUs, and the selection, within the 86 PSUs, of a total 230 listing areas, or LAs, in non-black areas, and 59 LAs in black areas. An LA consists of a block or groups of blocks whose projected 1975 household population was 160 people.

The housing units in these blocks were then listed by field personnel and households were randomly selected from these listings for interviewers to call on and screen for eligibility.

In actuality, we were able to make use of some listings recently completed for another national study. This reduced the number of households on which interviewers had to call to about 12,000. From this we completed interviews with 2,258 children in 1,748 households.